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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the research and development of a conceptual framework to use in restructuring rural schools. In reviewing the literature of school restructuring, citations were categorized under concepts related to fundamental change. Initial assumptions about school restructuring were identified, such as "learning is participatory." Ordering concepts in the literature were synthesized into four environments for interaction: curricular, instructional, coordinating, and governing. The researchers developed a conceptual framework to determine a school district's commitment to comprehensive change and to help rural school districts in planning and steering their comprehensive change efforts. The restructuring framework has three dimensions. First, the environments are represented broadly as program environments and policy environments. Second, activities in each of the environments are categorized as valuing, reflecting, or acting. Third, different perspectives about appropriate activities are described as technical, interpretative, and critical. The following four steps are proposed for working with rural school districts using the conceptual framework: (1) asking districts to assess their current restructuring approaches; (2) analyzing their level of commitment to comprehensive change; (3) providing assistance in district planning efforts; and (4) assisting the district in carrying out its plans. The paper contains two figures. (KS)

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Restructuring Rural Schools: The First Steps

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RESTRUCTURING RURAL SCHOOLS: THE FIRST STEPS

Richard W. Grove
Research for Better Schools

The Rural Education Project of Research for Better Schools (RBS) is planning to provide support to the restructuring projects of several rural schools in the Mid-Atlantic region. As part of the preparation for providing assistance to these schools, RBS staff have undertaken some first steps toward organizing an R&D approach to rural school restructuring. These steps are discussed in this paper.

The first section describes the construction of our knowledge bases. The second section presents the work to date on a conceptual framework for restructuring. The last section discusses our plans for utilizing the framework in rural school settings.

Step One: Researching the Knowledge Bases

Our first step was to build a knowledge base for restructuring. To that end, our resource center was able to provide us with a vast amount of reading material. Initially, we used ERIC descriptors to categorize the material, but our own filing system emerged as we discovered relevant concepts in the restructuring literature. Ten

months of reading, notetaking, and filing were necessary to identify all of the relevant concepts.

The primary outcome of this task is a document entitled "A Topical Restructuring Bibliography." It consists of more than a hundred citations, each of which is categorized under the following supporting concepts or approaches to restructuring which tend to support <u>fundamental change</u>:

> inquiry-based learning; higher-order thinking; problem-centered learning

> in-depth curriculum; deep understanding; conceptual learning

> group practices; cooperative learning; interactive learning

> instructional applications of technology

> integrated curriculum; interdisciplinary curriculum; thematic curriculum

> program partnerships; alternative programs; apprenticeships

> collaborative leadership; teachers as leaders

> evocative leadership; administrators as leaders

> organizing for learning; cooperatively organizing for learning

> instructional inquiry teams; teachers as researchers; partners in reflection

> decentralization; school-based management; site autonomy

> collaborative bargaining

> school choice

> shared decision-making with parents and community

> policies for restructuring

> outcomes-based models

> alternative methods of assessment

> system management; strategic planning; management information systems.

Six initial assumptions about school restructuring seemed to underlie these approaches.

(1) School restructuring approaches aim to achieve a fundamentally different order of results by altering roles, rules, and relationships.

(2) Learning is participatory. Fundamentally different results must also be meaningful to the learner.

(3) Certain policies, programs, practices, and processes are more appropriate than others for achelving fundamentally different and meaningful student learning.

(4) The appropriate participation of stakeholders contributes to a different order of student learning.

(5) A vision is needed to frame all efforts related to achieving a different order of student learning.

(6) Whole-child assessment contributes to a different order of student learning. Whole-child assessment must be addressed in terms of scope, depth, and quality.

We discovered that various sets of ordering concepts were differentiated in the restructuring literature (Majkowski 1991; McDonnell 1989; Newmann 1991; O'Nell 1990; Vaughn 1990). After examining these sets of ordering concepts, we were able to arrange them so that they could be compared and synthesized into one set (see Figure 1). The synthesized set of ordering concepts comprises four

Figure 1

Comparison and Synthesis of Ordering Concepts for Restructuring

McDonnell	O'Neill	Vaughn	Majkowski	Newmann
Content & Process	Curriculum & Instruction	------	Student Programs & Services	Curriculum & Instruction
Authority	Authority & Decision Making	Authority & Decision Making	---------	Governance (decentralize)
---------	Roles	-------	Roles & Relationships	Professional Roles
Accounta-bility	Accountability Systems	Accounta-bility	Accounta-bility	Accounta-bility
School-Community Links	-------	Community Involvement	---------	Governance (choice)

Environment: a setting for interaction, comprising roles, rules for interaction, and relationships

Curricular environment

formatively assessing learner readiness and designing curriculum

Instructional environment

enacting curriculum and constructing and utilizing knowledge

Coordinating environment

gathering and analyzing data and strategic planning

Governing environment

enacting the strategic plan and negotiating and utilizing policy

environments or settings for interaction: curricular, instructional, coordinating, and governing.

The environments comprise relevant sets of roles, rules that frame expectations for those roles, and relationships that result from the interaction of those roles (Corbett 1990). In the curricular environment, participants formatively assess learner readiness and design curriculum. In the instructional environment, learners enact curricular designs in order to actively construct and utilize knowledge. In the coordinating environment, participants gather and analyze data and engage in strategic planning. Finally, in the governing environment, strategic plans are enacted and stakeholders negotiate and utilize policies to guide educational practice.

Dialectic was identified as the general method of inquiry for the development of the framework. Specifically, we decided to utilize the oral/written Socratic method (Bhaerman 1970) among ourselves which would allow us to track the development of our framework. Also, we decided to seek expert feedback. The general method of inquiry for implementing the framework will be the case study. We have committed to four case studies of restructuring in rural schools in the Mid-Atlantic region. During evaluation of our efforts, we will perform a cross-site analysis to determine regularities and irregularities in changes across the four sites. In general, we will be identifying

facilitators and barriers to various restructuring processes, policies, programs, and practices in the four rural school sites.

Building the knowledge bases for both restructuring and rural education was problematic given our small staff. Threrefore, we decided the most expeditious strategy was to work with a partner, i.e., to establish a relationship with an expert in the field of rural education. Thus began our partnership with E. Robert Stephens of The University of Maryland. Stephens is a recognized scholar of rural education who happened to be developing his own conceptual framework for sorting out the potential effects of various restructuring approaches on rural school settings. Although it is not within the scope of this paper to present Stephens' work, the use of his framework in tandem with ours will be discussed briefly in the last section of this paper. Thus, with the ordering concepts, supporting concepts, and assumptions made explicit, we were ready to take the second step of developing the conceptual framework.

Step Two: Developing the Conceptual Framework

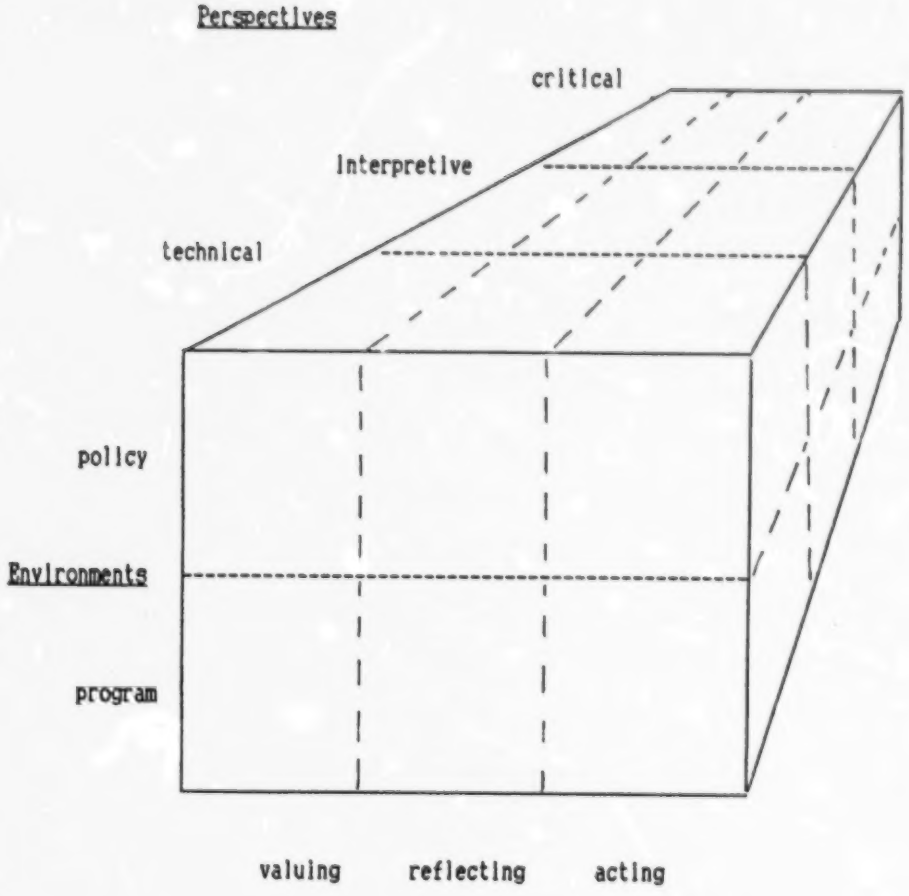
We constructed our conceptual framework for restructuring with several purposes in mind. First, we wanted it to help us determine a school district's commitment to <u>comprehensive change</u>, i.e., changes in one environment are supported by and linked to changes in other

environments. Second, we wanted to utilize the framework to help rural school districts in planning and steering their comprehensive change efforts. Finally, we wanted the framework to provide a structure for organizing materials and activities for the assistance we will provide our clients.

The restructuring framework has three dimensions, based upon the criteria of comprehensiveness and clarity (see Figure 2). First, the environments are represented broadly as program environments (curricular and instructional) and policy environments (coordinating and governing). This choice was made so that the linkages between the two broad types of environments could be determined. Second, activities in each of the environments are categorized as valuing, reflecting, or acting (Bloom 1956). These types of activities seem to capture the whole-person philosophy underlying many of our assumptions. Third, different perspectives about appropriate activities are described as technical, interpretive, and critical (van Manen 1977). Each perspective focuses differently on issues, the technical being concerned with acontextual means and ends, the interpretive with personal meaning, and the critical with the distribution and effects of power. The framework should be useful for comprehensively exploring restructuring issues from each perspective with clients.

Figure 2

A Conceptual Framework for Restructuring



Take, for example, the issue of empowerment. From the technical perspective, the key concern would be activities to empower people in order to improve student learning. The interpretive perspective would focus on the meanings of and assumptions about empowerment of the individual participants and their various groups. The critical perspective would be concerned with who makes decisions about empowering people and the degree to which power is to be redistributed. Some examples of other issues for exploration are accountability, assessment, leadership, and staff development.

New assumptions surfaced as we built the framework. Inherent is the idea that designers of change efforts and implementers of the efforts must be one-and-the-same. Learners as well as teachers must appropriately participate in designing and enacting curriculum; stakeholders must appropriately participate in strategic planning and deliberation; and our school clients must appropriately participate in deconstructing and reconstructing the framework and its contents. Also, it became apparent that we were thinking about restructuring the school district's social system, and the primary new structure that best captured our various intents is the learning community.

Step Three: Utilizing the Framework in Rural Schools

We have begun explorations with several rural districts in Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and New Jersey. The

site selection criterion of commitment to comprehensive change is being investigated. Also, we are helping districts build support for existing efforts which seek to bring about fundamental change. As such, we are learning how to build capacity for fundamental and comprehensive change by pursuing various resource development strategies. Once we finish testing the framework against expert experience, we will pilot it with selected and interested districts. At the very least, we expect the framework to change as it transacts with each specific context.

We envision four steps in utilizing the conceptual framework and the list of restructuring approaches in selecting and working with interested rural school districts. First, we will ask district clients to examine our list of restructuring approaches and to identify the ones in which they currently are engaged. After determining the accuracy of their assessment, we will utilize the framework to analyze their level of commitment to comprehensive change by categorizing the restructuring approaches which are in place. To determine this level of commitment, we will seek to understand if changes in one environment are supported by and linked to changes in other environments. Next, we will use the framework to provide assistance in district planning efforts. Specifically, the framework will provide a basis for setting priorities in the allocation of resources to current district efforts in

fundamental change and for deciding which new initiatives would increase their level of commitment to comprehensive change. Finally, we will use the framework as a means for assisting the district in carrying out its plans. Specifically, the framework will organize our assistance efforts, for example, providing pertinent information, facilitating dialogue, brokering staff development activities, and making recommendations. Ultimately, the framework will help us and our clients to understand and shape their restructuring efforts.

To facilate our work, the following process guidelines for responsible interaction were developed from research on effective group leadership (Grove 1992) and will be shared with our clients.

> Model receptivity. Accept remarks and other behaviors without passing immediate judgment. Seek clarification when you do not understand. Help others ask questions.

> Recognize the individual. Pay attention to personal needs. Help structure work around people's interests. Help people relate their personal experiences to the work at hand.

> Encourage collaboration. Express common needs. Point out shared interests. Remark on common experiences.

Also, we will work out the specifics of the tandem usage of the our framework with Stephens'. Generally, we will use the restructuring framework to help districts identify, plan, and implement a comprehensive array of restructuring approaches. Then we will utilize the second

framework to speculate on potential effects of a particular approach in rural settings.

Ultimately, we will engage in the in-depth case studies of comprehensive change in four rural schools in the Mid-Atlantic region. What we hope to produce is a diversity of knowledge about the issues and strengths of rural schools as they face the challenges of school restructuring. What we expect to find are able rural educators who will participate as equal partners with us in the inquiry and change effort.

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